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QUESTION OF THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS IN ANY PART OF THE WORLD

Written statement* submitted by the Agence internationale pour le développement, a non-governmental organization with special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[13 March 2000]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization.

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A deafening silence

A sombre anniversary: in February 1944, Russia deported large numbers of Chechens on the sordid and fallacious accusation that they were pro-Nazi ... In those days it was deportation trains, now it is "filtration" camps; then it was Stalin, now it is Putin.

The Chechen capital is at present sealed off by the Russian army, which is frantically sifting through the population. Not a day goes by without numerous accounts of summary executions of men, women, old people and children in Grozny and other Chechen localities.

In their all-out war against the Chechens, the Russians have made intensive use of high-explosive and destructive munitions.

The atrocities committed by Russian troops in the filtration camps remain concealed behind Russian censorship and the authorities' denials.

The Russian authorities, who are accused by the international organizations of "war crimes" on a large scale against the civilian population, are completing their blockade around Chechnya.

Humanitarian organizations are still denied access to the area.

Requests by Europe and the United States to send international observers are categorically rejected.

Stricter censorship is aggravating the almost total silence of the Western media

Unfortunately there is hardly any doubt about the facts: when a Government keeps denying the press access, when the information gathered by local human rights organizations is not released, there is good reason to be alarmed. Yes, the facts are there: thousands of people are being displaced each day. Some 120,000 to 150,000 have no access to food or water; 250,000 more, equivalent to three-quarters of the Chechen population, live with others, or under tents (19 per cent) or in railway carriages.

Conditions of hygiene are appalling. More than a third of the refugee children in the small neighbouring republic of Ingushetia are suffering from malnutrition.

Since the beginning of the war, Chechen medical facilities have been bombed deliberately and systematically.

Thousands of wounded have no access to medical care; women are left to drift in a devastated country, exposed to the arbitrary will of the Russian military.

Many refugees tell of summary exactions against the inhabitants of Grozny and the neighbouring villages, committed during the Russian army's advance in January and February of this year, at a time when the wave of violence against civilians was worsening.

No care for the wounded, a starving population, torture in the filtration camps where Chechens are detained ... These undeniably constitute "WAR CRIMES"

And while as we write sinister cleaning-up operations with all the exactions and liquidations they entail are still continuing in Grozny, the attention and indignation of world opinion are turned elsewhere, focusing on Austria or some other minor news.

Although the events in Grozny concern real facts, in the form of thousands of deaths, flagrant violations of human rights and international rules, and the practically systematic refusal to allow aid through to refugees and victims, Western Governments, clearly reluctant to antagonize the Russian authorities, timidly express their "concern".

Our NGOs (AIDE and AIDE Federation) are experiencing a feeling of profound humiliation at the lenient attitude shown by the United States and the European Union towards the situation in Chechnya.

Meanwhle, hard-pressed civilians have given up hoping for any decisive initiatives by the international organizations. Since the meetings in Helsinki and Istanbul, at which France had suggested possible measures against Moscow, protest has alternated with appeasement.

The alternatives right now are straightforward:

- either we turn a blind eye to the execution of a whole people,
- or we break the taboo surrounding its independence.

Chechen history and memory cannot and should not cause serious concern to those who are worried about the risk of a proliferation of separatist moves in Europe and who use this argument to bring all political action to a standstill.

We are faced here with a situation involving "war crimes", and even "crimes against humanity". Moscow is in fact a signatory to conventions making such crimes imprescriptible. The Russians have recently recognized some "errors". By appointing a representative for human rights in Chechnya, they are acknowledging the extent of the damage.

One argument put forward is that Russia is not a member of the European Union. Milosevic's Yugoslavia was not a member either, and Russia is definitely a member of other European institutions, the signatory of numerous conventions and an accepted partner of the major Western powers and of all sorts of formal and informal forums.

We are deeply shocked that Russia, a signatory to and therefore guarantor of the Geneva Conventions, of conventions on the protection of the civilian population, and of the protection of human rights, in addition to being a member of the Council of Europe and of the United Nations Security Council, is engaging in flagrant and repeated violations of these conventions.

There is increasing evidence, which leaves little room for doubt that the Russian defence budget has again become a priority, the army, receiving the lion's share of the State budget, is using every possible means to continue its dirty war, while the population is still struggling to make ends meet.

Our NGOs (AIDE and AIDE Federation) can only be astonished at the pusillanimous reaction of the Western powers. No formal condemnation has yet emerged from the Council of Europe. The London Club and French banks such as Crédit Lyonnais and BNP have even lightened the Russian debt burden. There has been no reaction either from the United Nations.

And yet, according to the Geneva Conventions, the civilian population and facilities cannot be the target of attacks. NATO's action in Kosovo has served as an example. The NGOs of the United Nations have no control over developments in Chechnya. NATO is afraid of upsetting its old opponent (which gave it the green light in Kosovo), the World Bank and the IMF, anxious to attract major debtor and client to the global market, refuse to stiffen the terms of their loans.

Europe, always ready sanctimoniously to object to xenophobic attitudes, turns a blind eye when a people is exposed to savage racism for reasons of State.

Might it not be worth now ceasing to look upon Russia with the sort of fear that has traditionally inspired Western policy towards Moscow?

We are seized with disgust when we see a few seconds' worth of pictures secretly filmed by a BBC reporter, which are screened for TV viewers with no comment, showing acts of barbarism by Russian forces, torture and inhuman exactions, all perpetrated without any reactions by Western leaders, who are usually so fussy about preserving human dignity.

Faced with this deafening silence on the part of the international community, and being aware as we are that there is no political will, that any measure that would embarrass the Russian Government is excluded, all we can do is write these few lines to strongly denounce these large-scale war crimes committed by Russian forces, to object to the lack of sanctions taken by the international community against Moscow, to emphasize that the consenting powerlessness of States before the barbaric behaviour of Russian troops in Chechnya only heightens the need for international criminal justice, and to call loud and clear for an immediate halt to repression and reprisals.

Our NGO (Agence Internationale pour le développement) and the AIDE Federation comprising 165 international NGOs, appeal to the United Nations Secretary-General to appoint a commission of independent experts of States and belligerents so that at the very least the needs of the civilian population may be assessed.

We call for humanitarian organizations to have free access to Chechnya and especially to Grozny, and for the immediate closure of filtration camps, where detainees are subjected to inhuman treatment and where extrajudicial executions are still occurring.

We consider that the time has come to ask clearly are we going to wait until the facts have demonstrated after the event the genocidal intent of the Russian authorities before we object to the extermination of a whole people?

Must we wait for a whole people to disappear before we find out whether deliberate annihilation is in progress?

Finally, bearing in mind the lofty principles of the very recent humanitarian war in Kosovo, we cannot help thinking that very different standards are being applied in different places

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